

MANY RIVERS TO CROSS

Texts on Sunday, January 10, 2010

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I hope that you might hear what I hear when Isaiah is read. When the poet opens his mouth, I wish you to know that his audience is a band of exiles in a strange land—children of exiles, really, for fifty years have passed since *dies illa, dies iræ*—that terrible day—when a few thousand families of Judah’s leaders were forced to march out of Jerusalem 900 miles to the city of Babylon. And I wish you could hear them singing Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon where we sat down
And there we wept when we remembered Zion.
Was the wicked carried us away: captivity
Required from us a song
How can we sing King Alpha song in a strange land?

And I wish you knew that when the poet now describes God as the one “who created you, O Jacob; who formed you, O Israel,” that “Jacob” is a nickname for the tribe of Judah, partly in exile, partly not, but that *Israel* is the name for ten other tribes whose identities were wiped from history two hundred years before: the lost tribes of Israel. I wish you could hear the longing in the poet’s heart, like a bird alone crying into the night, aching for sound somewhere of kin calling, yearning now for reunion and communion so utter as to shatter the vaults of time and error with renewed possibility.

When the poet now boldly receives into his own throat the voice of the Divine, saying, “I have called you by name, you are mine—When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,” I wish you might feel with them who heard that poet first how they know that they would indeed soon pass through waters, real wet waters, for news has come that Babylon is ruined and the exiles and the children of exiles may go home to Jerusalem. The great Euphrates will water most of their path, but at the last, like Abraham and Sarah who trekked this very way, they must at length leave its ample flow and pass through dry lands to come again down to the river Jordan, like Joshua and Caleb long before, and there pass through the waters to take the promised land . . . again.

I wish you could hear their hopes and fears from all the years. For this band of exiles held to heart the hard oracles of Judah’s prophets, speaking God’s hatred for how kings and landed men and their wives pulled from the poor the last straws of dignity while the clergy and the people bowed before powers on earth, not as it is in heaven. How they had failed the promise of their land the first time, wandering from God’s word as if still in a desert of ignorance!

How startling for you, if with these exiles you might feel the resonance of liberation at the parting of the waters, their exodus from slavery, when their God had indeed gone with them, and the waters did not overwhelm. When the poet says “waters,” this band of exiles hear freedom, they hear responsibility, they hear possibility again—against torrents of sorrow and sin. How they need this poet’s song now, “When you pass through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. Fear not, for I am with you. I will bring your offspring from the east and from the west . . . To the north, I will say, Give! To the south, Keep none back . . . Bring all who are called in my name.”

Stand inside this pathos of desire for the healing of the nations. Weigh in your breast their resolution together to go and stand a new trial in order to be found—not innocent, God knows, but—worthy to become a light to the nations. Then take on your shoulders five hundred years more of hope and expectation for deliverance from empires, and then you are ready to come down to the river Jordan and see what John the Baptist is doing at these waters in the thirtieth year of our Lord, more or less. Do you see?

John has been feeling in his people for a pulse—a religious impulse for truth and hope—but he has found none. He wants to revive them—yes, he’s a revivalist. So he acts out a parable. He sings Judah’s oldest song—the passing through the waters song. He takes the people out into the waters, back over Jordan, that they each one may like their great grandmothers and great grandfathers bestir themselves from despair and take again to heart the promise of God, with no more priests, confident that when they pass through these waters, they will not overwhelm.

Into this river, into this baptism whose meaning is not so much personal as it is communal and historical—a movement in a people to accept their their new identity and stand for a whole world, east and west, north and south— into this baptism, Jesus stepped. “Wade in the water, wade in the water, children . . . God gonna trouble the water.” Look what has happened at each of these many rivers we’ve crossed during a ten minute intro to the Bible: at every crossing, a new identity forms in a people. Abraham crosses the Euphrates with Sarah; he leaves his earthly father to become the father of faith. A band of escaped slaves cross the blood red sea and become the people of the Word on Mount Sinai. Joshua crosses Jordan and the wandering word becomes Israel in Canaan. The exiles cross—and become the Jews, a new people, with a new way to worship, and renewed hope. *I’m only going over Jordan, I’m only going . . . over home*

Now in all humility, Jesus, following John, passes through the waters and becomes a new being, the Son, the beloved of God, who will pass through the waters of death that a whole people might hear their name called: *the rivers shall not overwhelm you*. Have you waded into like waters with your God—not waters of personal salvation, but waters waiting for a whole world to come to pass? This is what your baptism was for: not just to make you a new person, but a new people.

Sometimes Christians wonder why this old Bible should be the church’s main book. They cringe at its portrayal of God, preferring their own poets, their own songs. Sometimes Christians cringe to be Christian—to be associated with this name and history so sullied with race-pride and bigotry, with slothfulness in the face of evil and much war. Sometimes just the songs from another age of Christianity make us seethe. *Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war?* Denominations act like nations, unable to make peace. Out, out, we want out of systems and patterns not of our choosing.

But if anyone should cringe at Christianity, would it not be African-Americans? Haven’t you whose ancestors were dragged here through waters that most certainly overwhelmed millions, more reason than any person or group to doubt and distrust this religion? While we make no judgment whatsoever on those who do choose another, the big fact of religion in America is that far from cringing from Christianity, brothers and sisters of color have listened deep into the book to draw out its eternal unquenchable people-making word and to teach it to those who once held them in chains: “From east and west, from north and south, bring everyone called by my name, whom I created, for my glory—everyone, whom I formed and I made.” The nation being newly formed in Christ at the river’s bank, if you see it truly and join your soul to it wholly, will never give you cause to cringe, but only to claim a people made one not in the flesh, not by clan, not by sex or sexual orientation or accident of birth—and not even according to creed, but one in all humanity, deeper than all evidence visible and invisible.

But—this is how the Christian crosses—you come to this verge of the Jordan by the cross, yes, by losing your old life that you may be given a new. Whoever resists for his own sake, whoever insists on herself first, does not hear this word, does not find the many river yet to cross. “I went down in the river to pray. Studying about that good old way. And who shall wear the starry crown?” Who indeed! Everyone—whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made. Everyone. Good Lord, show me the way.

By now, you hear, if you had not already sensed it long ago, that the ancient lively conversation between the Jordan River and the Exodus of slaves and baptism is all about liberation, not just personal, but communal and historical. Of course it is the case that the privileged and dominant culture needs to learn its gospel from those pushed to the margin of society. Of course those at the margin hear the word better, deeper and together in all its people-birthing power, while the rich render their gospel personal and private. It has always been this way.

So follow true leaders. Accept this one book as your book. Of course you will not therefore hold each of its sentences equal in value to all the others, as if your starry crown gave you no powers to distinguish love from fear. But be baptized again today into the unity of holding one book not of your choosing together with all humanity, across all time, across all lands. To do so does not mean you think yourself more in the right than Muslims or Jews or Buddhists. To hold one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one book held by the symbol of all hands of every kind and color and ableness is an act of humility, to go under the waters, to die to yourself and be graced with the vision of unity, transcending all the tragedies of time and chance and error. The sacraments are founded on these turning points in the history of God's walk with God's people, when the new community sprang to life. Be baptized into the nation of one, already prepared, yet to be revealed.

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